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Bush Alerted in May to Soviet Military Cuts

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The Defense Department, citing a consensus in the U.S. intelligence community, told President Bush in a classified study in May that the Soviet Union was reversing a 20-year pattern of growth in military spending. But Bush and his senior advisers continued until last month to assert that Soviet defense spending was growing.

The Pentagon study of U.S. defense strategy was ordered by Bush shortly after his election to provide his administration with a blueprint for dealing with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and the Soviet military threat.

A 26-page executive summary of the secret report, made available to The Washington Post, states "there is broad agreement within the U.S. intelligence community that the Soviet Union under Gorbachev has decided to reverse a 20-year pattern of growth in Soviet military spending and force structure in order to boost the civil economy and Soviet foreign policy."

The study, dated May 13, also refers to public promises by Soviet officials to cut military forces by 10 percent, defense spending by 15 percent and outlays for new weapons by 20 percent over the next two years.

"U.S. intelligence believes the cuts will take place, and are likely to be followed by additional unilateral retrenchments that could be announced at any time," the document states.

But throughout 1989 until late November, Bush, Vice President Quayle and Defense Secretary Richard B. Cheney repeatedly criticized what they said was rising Soviet defense spending. At the same time, the administration continued to press Congress to approve the \$295.6 billion defense budget for fiscal 1990 agreed to at the May budget "summit" by congressional and administration officials.

Bush said on Nov. 7, for example, that he agreed with Quayle that Soviet defense spending is growing and that he would "like to see—find a way to reverse that. . . . Perhaps there will be a way to reverse that."

A White House spokesman, responding this week to questions about the classified study, said: "When it was written, people were trying to prognosticate on the basis of Soviet announcements and very early indications of Soviet behavior. In fact, at that time, our estimates were that there were few, if any, changes."

A senior official, speaking on condition he not be identified, pointed to uncertainties in the report about "exactly how" the Soviet spending cuts would be implemented. But he acknowledged that the May report did not equivocate about the downward direction of Soviet military spending.

Senior administration officials ceased public assertions of higher Soviet military spending last month after The Post and the New York Times published articles in which unnamed intelligence analysts expressed the opposite view.

State Department spokesman Margaret Tutwiler then said Soviet military spending was declining, although a spokesman for the Defense Department maintained that the evidence remained unclear.

The Pentagon report to Bush was widely circulated to senior administration policy-makers six months earlier, officials said.

Cheney, briefing reporters on the 1989 edition of the annual Pentagon study, "Soviet Military Power," said Sept. 27 that "despite all the rhetoric about reducing their military budgets, Soviet defense spending has actually increased an average of 3 percent per year in real terms since 1985."

Neither he nor Bush, who delivered speeches on U.S.-Soviet relations following the internal government review, mentioned the intelligence community's assessment.

Though the study preceded the

upheavals in Eastern Europe and the Bush-Gorbachev meeting off Malta last weekend, it anticipated with eerie precision the East-West agenda as it has unfolded.

It stated that "near- to medium-term goals" of U.S. policy-makers should include an attempt to win Soviet "adherence to the obligation which it undertook at the end of World War II to permit self-determination for the countries of East-Central Europe."

If this goal is achieved, along with "demilitarization" of Soviet foreign policy and reduction of military forces, "the United States may be presented with the opportunity to make fundamental changes in its defense strategy and force posture."

This conclusion appears to be in harmony with a new tone at the Defense Department, where Cheney has asked the military services to begin planning for major reductions in U.S. defense spending over the next four years.

The report's analysis of the Soviet Union shows more certainty in the short term than in the long term. It does not speculate on the longevity of Gorbachev's political career.

"The intelligence community believes that current Soviet policies are likely to continue at least over the next five to seven years," the study concludes, but adds, "There is great uncertainty, however, especially about the period thereafter."

It noted that Sovietologists "are divided as to how optimistic, skeptical or simply uncertain we ought to be about the future of Soviet strategic behavior."

But it is apparent, the study says, that Gorbachev's changes "aim to make the U.S.S.R. a 'real,' multifaceted superpower, enjoying not only competitive military strength, but political, economic and cultural influence of global scope like the United States."

As such, the report concludes, Gorbachev's foreign policy "is designed to make a profitable virtue of historic necessity: to reduce hostility with the West, Japan and China without sacrificing central security interests; to dampen the strategic competition and free resources for economic revival, and to increase access to Western technology."

The study states that a diminishing Soviet military threat would reveal a "long obscured . . . set of global defense imperatives" given short shrift during the Cold War, particularly the threat from well-armed Third World powers, such as Iraq and North Korea.

The study notes that a dozen or more Third World countries have more than 1,000 tanks each and that "increasingly, linkages between terrorists, insurgents and the narcotics traffickers are being documented." It said these will likely pose greater challenges to U.S. forces, which may not now be equipped to deal with them.